

VZCZCXYZ0009
PP RUEHWEB

DE RUEHTU #0277/01 0780918
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 180918Z MAR 08
FM AMEMBASSY TUNIS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 4651
INFO RUCNMGH/MAGHREB COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

UNCLAS TUNIS 000277

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STATE FOR NEA/MAG (HARRIS AND HOPKINS)
STATE ALSO FOR H - PLEASE PASS CODEL BOEHNER

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [OREP](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [ECON](#) [PTER](#) [TS](#)
SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR CODEL BOEHNER

SUMMARY

¶1. (U) Embassy Tunis warmly welcomes CODEL Boehner and accompanying members to Tunis from March 24 - 26, 2008. Tunisia proudly -- and justifiably -- calls itself a "country that works." Despite Tunisia's relatively small economy and lack of natural resources, the Tunisian government has proven itself capable of providing basic education, health care, housing and a workable infrastructure to its population. Tunisia has the most diversified economy in the region and enjoys one of the highest standards of living on the continent. The political system is dominated by a single party, the Democratic Constitutional Rally (RCD), and political liberties are tightly controlled. This cable provides background information on these themes. END SUMMARY.

The Bilateral Relationship

¶2. (SBU) Your visit takes place in the context of a long-standing and positive bilateral relationship; the United States was the first Western power to recognize an independent Tunisia in 1956. The importance of the bilateral relationship has been manifested in several recent high-level visits: Congressional visits include CODEL Cramer in 2008; and CODELs Tanner, Costello, Jackson-Lee, and Inouye in 2007.

AUSTR Shaun Donnelly, the State Department's Coordinator for Counterterrorism Dell Dailey and Assistant Secretary of State C. David Welch also all visited Tunisia in 2008.

Socio-Economic Context

¶3. (SBU) Tunisia proudly -- and justifiably -- calls itself a "country that works." Despite Tunisia's relatively small economy and lack of natural resources, the Tunisian government provides basic education, health care, housing and a workable infrastructure to its population. Tunisian women enjoy more rights and opportunities than in any other Arab Muslim country. As a result of these policies, the majority of Tunisians are generally moderate and desire a government intent on modernizing the country and integrating it fully into the world economy.

¶4. (U) Tunisia has the most diversified economy in the region and enjoys one of the highest standards of living on the continent. The country does not have vast reserves of hydrocarbons like its neighbors Algeria and Libya but has prospered under long-standing government policies to develop manufacturing industries for export and to promote tourism.

The Government of Tunisia also seeks to attract foreign direct investment and strengthen its traditional agricultural sector. Thanks to these policies, Tunisia's economy has maintained average annual growth rates of almost five percent over the past ten years. At the same time, social programs limit population growth, provide a high standard of education, and ensure a relatively decent standard of living for all. Average annual per capita income is approximately US \$2800. The United States and Tunisia signed a Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA) in 2002 to strengthen bilateral economic engagement. The third TIFA Council meeting took place in Tunis on March 10-11.

Political Overview

¶5. (SBU) Tunisia is a constitutional republic with a population of approximately 10 million, dominated by a single political party, the Democratic Constitutional Rally (RCD). Zine El Abidine Ben Ali has been President since 1987, when he removed President Bourguiba. Although the GOT has many of the institutions of democracy, it is not a democracy. Three opposition parties fielded candidates in the October 2004 presidential election, official results indicated that President Ben Ali won approximately 95 percent of the registered popular vote. The official turnout was reportedly higher than 90 percent of registered voters, although there were indications that voter turnout figures were artificially inflated. Tunisia has a bicameral legislature. In addition to the Chamber of Deputies, a second legislative body, the Chamber of Advisors, was created in a 2002 referendum amending the Constitution. The legislature plays a limited role as an arena for debate on national policy but never introduces legislation and virtually always passes bills presented by the Executive with only minor changes. National elections - both presidential and legislative - will next be held in 2009.

¶6. (SBU) Political liberties remain tightly controlled and civil society development is stifled. Tunisia's sluggishness on political reform has been a point of contention in the US-Tunisian relationship in recent years. Although President Ben Ali has introduced some positive political reforms in the past two years (pardoning some political prisoners, lifting a form of censorship for print media, and allowing independent media outlets), civil society and human rights groups continue to report many instances of government harassment, intimidation, and limits on their activities. Journalists reject the suggestion that press censorship has ended, and local media usually lacks any meaningful coverage of domestic political issues. In the 2007 Reporters Without Borders Worldwide Press Freedom Index, Tunisia was ranked 145 out of 169 countries.

Security Situation

¶7. (SBU) There is a threat of terrorism in Tunisia, particularly in light of the establishment of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). AQIM claimed it abducted two Austrian tourists in Tunisia on February 22. The kidnappers are reportedly asking for five million euros and the release of several prisoners being held in Algeria and Tunisia in exchange for the hostages. In January 2007, Tunisian security forces disrupted a terrorist group in December 2006/January 2007, killing or capturing many individuals who reportedly planned to carry out acts of violence in Tunisia. The US Embassy and personnel in Tunis were reportedly among the group's intended targets. In 2002, a faction of al-Qaeda claimed responsibility for an attack on the Ghriba synagogue on the southern island of Djerba. This attack, in which 20 victims were killed, was the first al-Qaeda related terrorist attack after September 11.

¶8. (SBU) The Government of Tunisia remains concerned about signs of increasing Islamic extremism and considers national

security one of its major priorities. Therefore, it places a high value on its historic and robust military-military relationship with the United States. Unfortunately, and against the backdrop of a very limited national budget, new equipment is needed to match the evolving and common threat of transnational terrorism. At present, Tunisia receives approximately US \$8 million in Foreign Military Financing (FMF), nearly all of which is used for the partial maintenance of its aging fleets of US-origin equipment. FMF is expected to drop in FY-09 to possibly as low as US \$2 million, which will make any significant recapitalization of the Tunisian Armed Forces problematic, unless additional third-country or other financing is secured. In addition to FMF, the Mission is also pursuing possible options for Section 1206 funding for Tunisia's military.

19. (SBU) That said, Tunisia has been and remains an active participant in United Nations peacekeeping missions, including in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DROC), Ethiopia and Eritrea. The GOT is cooperative on certain military issues, and takes part in NATO seminars and activities, and is extremely appreciative of US assistance (which includes IMET, USEUCOM Humanitarian Assistance, counterterrorism-related seminars, and other activities). In fact, the GOT reciprocated the USG's past generosity with a symbolic gesture of two C-130 loads -- some 20 tons -- of humanitarian assistance in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.

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